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Ukraine: The Security Fulcrum of Europe?

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Conclusions

- Ukraine's national security policy appears destined to be a balancing act between NATO and Russia, maintaining its own sovereignty while acting as a bridge and stabilizing force between East and West.
- Ukraine needs both political and economic development in order to be a credible and viable regional actor, able to carry out this pivotal role, and to avoid becoming drawn into the Eastern fold.
- NATO enlargement should be geared towards Ukraine's ability to play a bridging role. A precipitous enlargement would raise Russian concerns, thus threatening Ukraine's own security and Moscow's relations with the West to the detriment of overall European security.

Historical Legacy

Historically, Ukraine has been both the target of and the site of various conflicts among competing empires, most notably Czarist and Soviet Russia, seeking to expand their domains or to solidify borders. Caught in this vortex of conflict, Ukraine was able to gain freedom for approximately 10 years during the 700-odd year history in the wake of the decline of the Kievan-Rus Kingdom in the 13th century. Emerging as an independent state in 1991, Ukraine has not forgotten its past and has geared much of its security policy on this basis.

Ukraine faces three potential external security threats: First, a unilateral threat from Russia; second, a concern of being caught in the crosshairs of a NATO-Russian conflict, reminiscent of its past; and, third, the eruption of irredentist claims along its borders, which were artificially created by the Soviet regime, and which can have claimants such as Russia and Romania, neither of which have signed bilateral treaties respecting Ukraine's borders. This security triad is complicated by the zone of instability that confronts Ukraine, ranging from the Transdnister problem in neighboring Moldova, to the conflicts in the Caucasus to the East, as well as in Russia itself, that can overflow to engulf it.

The Russia Factor

For Ukrainian policymakers Russia poses both the most imminent as well as long-term threat to Ukraine's national security. Prior to independence, the greater part of Ukraine had been under Russian control for over 300 years. Ukrainian policymakers are well aware of the actual and potential pressures that Russia has at its disposal. Economically, Ukraine is dependent on Russia for oil and gas, as well as a major share of its trade. Culturally, the two peoples share many common points: religious orthodoxy, customs, similarities of languages, and a high degree of intermarriage--all of which can be positive factors in preventing open conflict, but which, on the negative side, can draw Ukraine towards Russia at the expense of Ukraine's own sovereignty. The Black Sea Fleet issue, even after a mutually acceptable division, will give Russia a presence in Crimea and thus added leverage on Ukraine, as does the large Russian minority in Ukraine which comprises 22% of the population. Russia's geographic expanse also will guarantee Moscow a role in all regional affairs, including the Black Sea littoral, thus possibly making Russian interests compete against those of Ukraine.

Kiev is aware that even in the optimal environment of membership in some form of Western alliance, its exposure to Russian influences will continue. The tentacles that link both states are numerous, many of which, such as customs and languages, will not diminish over time with the internal economic development of Ukraine or its integration into the world economy.

Kiev, therefore, has recognized the need for astute diplomacy, the main goal being not to irritate its bilateral relationship with Russia. As a result, Ukraine has maintained a delicate balance of seeking to integrate itself into western structures, distancing itself from Russia, while also alleviating Moscow's concerns that a strong, pro-Western Ukraine will arise on its borders.

These concerns have involved three simultaneous broad policy approaches: first, Ukraine has consistently stated its role as a neutral, non-bloc country--as a signal to Russia of its nonhostile intentions. This continuing policy was stated as early as 1990, prior to independence. The emphasis is on non-bloc status--rather than neutrality in the strict sense--since Ukraine views its security being enhanced through active, impartial involvement rather than in distancing itself from European issues. Ukraine has sought to translate this position into a positive political force binding it into the European fabric. This has been done, for example, by offering itself as a potential mediator on issues, as it unsuccessfully sought to do in the Yugoslav conflict. Second, Kiev has called for a new European security structure, which simultaneously serves as a rationale for its moving towards European links and institutions without raising Moscow's suspicions. And, third, Ukraine has assiduously parried Russian entreaties to join a Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) military structure. Kiev fears Moscow's control of the CIS and its use as an instrument for the extension of Russian control into the former republics. While Ukraine has been wary of the political and military dimensions of the CIS, it is cooperating in certain areas on the economic front. Under this strategy, Ukraine hopes to solidify its security while at the same time assisting in the creation of the long-term goal of pan-European cooperation, including Russia, which it believes will be the ultimate guarantor of its security.

Looking West, Smiling East

Ukraine has carefully constructed its foreign policy in the wake of its initial setback in the flush of early independence. At that time, Kiev anticipated that the West would welcome Ukraine as a prize in the post-Soviet world. Having exerted numerous resources for decades to stymie the Soviet threat, Kiev reasoned that the West would quickly embrace Ukraine, providing not only security but also political

and economic assistance to prevent any future Russian threats.

Kiev actively sought security assurances from the United States during former President Leonid Kravchuk's May 1992, visit. The United States opposed this initiative, expressing the fear that such a step would invite similar demands by other states. That month Ukraine also signed the Lisbon Protocol, making Ukraine part of the START I process and, furthermore, obligating Ukraine to give up all of its 176 strategic missiles not just the ones covered by the START I treaty. However, that summer, Kiev began to stall on START I ratification, demanding security assurances as a prerequisite to any ratification. This moved the United States to meet many of Ukraine's concerns, culminating in the Trilateral Statement signed along with Russia in January, 1994 which previewed the assurances that would be extended to Ukraine once START entered into force and Ukraine joined the NPT as a non-nuclear weapon state party. Ukraine's parliament, which had ratified START I in November, 1993 with conditions, accepted the treaty without conditions in February 1994 and Kiev became a signatory to the NPT late in 1994. It is expected that all nuclear warheads will be out of Ukraine by the end of 1996.

Britain, France, and China joined in the security assurances also, thus committing the nuclear powers to respect Ukraine's independence and to refrain from the threat or use of force against Ukraine. The assurances also commit them to immediate UN Security Council consultations in the event of a nuclear security threat to Ukraine. The results, however, were short of what some Ukrainian parliamentarians would have preferred, including one gambit aimed at committing the United States to come to Ukraine's military defense.

Retention of the nuclear weapons was a hotly contested issue in the Ukrainian polity, mostly as a means of leverage against any potential Russian threat and because Kiev had given up its tactical weapons by early May 1992, without gaining anything in return. But Ukrainians realized that, due to not having operational control of the missiles, the maintenance costs involved, and the environmental and health threats that deteriorating missiles would pose, the retention of nuclear weapons was a self-defeating exercise. Kiev, however, is realistic that the assurances, while not a guarantee of its security, do give Ukraine recognition for its unilateral nuclear disarmament and acknowledge Ukraine's security concerns.

During this time, Kiev was also seeking to build its security on a multilateral, regional basis. In 1993, Ukraine proposed a zone of stability and security in Central and Eastern Europe, stretching from the Baltic to the Black Seas. This envisaged a loose alliance based on economic cooperation, security, settlement of border disputes, and the handling of national minorities issues. A series of consultations rather than formal ties would have bound the members. The proposal was given short shrift in the West and by East European states who feared it would block their goal of NATO membership and needlessly irritate Moscow. A similar French proposal also failed.

This experience--coupled with the West's pro-Russia policy, the NATO debate ending at the Polish border, and the reality of Kiev's Russian links--reinforced for the Ukrainian leadership the difficulties of moving from under the Russian shadow and hence the need to balance this reality with its future goal of pan-European cooperation. To bridge the gaps and to maintain its security, Kiev has been a proponent of a European security concept in which all states would participate equally. The underlying philosophy is that security is indivisible.

Ukraine's dilemma is epitomized by its approach to NATO enlargement. Kiev has stated that it has no intention of joining NATO and will maintain strict neutrality and its nonbloc status. In this vein, Ukraine has also said it will not join the CIS collective security treaty. But, in a clear signal to Moscow, Ukraine has stated it sees no threat with NATO's enlargement, unlike Moscow, which would regard such a move

as a threat to Russia's national interest. Ukraine has also said that no state (i.e., Russia) has the right to veto NATO enlargement.

Kiev opposes a rapid eastward enlargement of NATO while Moscow opposes any expansion. Ukraine fears rapid expansion would renew the tension of the Cold War, leaving Ukraine exposed to the pressures of Moscow without the support of the West. This would make Ukraine a buffer with all the inherent dangers that such a position has historically brought for Ukraine. Ukraine's current view is that the lack of tension precludes justification for NATO's rapid enlargement, or for that matter the creation of a CIS military bloc.

Ukraine's NATO position, however, has not prevented it from concluding bilateral military cooperation agreements, or expanding its cooperation with NATO. In February 1994, Ukraine was the first former Soviet republic to sign onto Partnership for Peace (PFP) and in September 1995, it presented an Individual Partnership Program (IPP). Kiev has made clear that it will not limit its role to individual programs like the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC) and PFP. It has also made it equally clear that such activities will not threaten Russia or lead to a Ukrainian military relationship with NATO. Along these lines, in 1992, Kiev dispatched 400 plus troops as part of the UNPROFOR (UN Protection Force) peacekeeping mission in Sarajevo and has also assigned 550 troops for the current IFOR (Implementation Force) mission which is helping implement the Bosnia peace accord. Ukraine sees these roles as not only strengthening its security by linking it closer to Europe, but also as participation in a process of building a unified Europe, and gaining recognition for Ukraine.

Kiev has balanced this approach towards the West with parallel moves towards Russia. Ukraine has reached a number of military agreements with Russia. Some Ukrainian officials have not dismissed participating in a future Russian-sponsored military cooperation arrangement of Slavic peoples, while other officials have balanced this by not totally dismissing any future NATO membership. And, underlining the ultimate balancing act, Ukraine has kept open the possibility of becoming some type of mediator in NATO's relations with Russia.

Ukraine's Bridging Role

Ukraine appears destined to continue balancing its interests between East and West and has the potential to grow as an unofficial bridge between the two. In this environment, NATO enlargement would be seen as less a threat by Moscow, and Kiev's role could help dissolve the barriers between the West and the East, facilitating Russia's integration into the European fold. The sequencing would be important, since any hasty enlargement of NATO without a strong, intervening Ukraine could unbalance these developments, and consign Ukraine to the Russian sphere.

There is always the danger that Ukraine could lose some of its flexibility, but it appears to be in the interest of both sides to guarantee Ukraine's role: for Russia, because it presents a non-hostile border state; and, for NATO, because Ukraine offers itself as a means to regional security. Ukraine has a population of 52 million on a large territory; a strategic geographic location bordering on seven countries; and agricultural and industrial resources--putting it in an excellent position to succeed as a mediator and become an important regional and European actor. The approach has an added domestic benefit of attenuating the philosophical split between the pro-West and pro-East forces that forms a major divide in the Ukrainian polity--as witnessed by the political undercurrents for creation of some form of union with Russia. The strategy's shortcoming would be an internal economic and political collapse of Ukraine which, because of its borders, large ethnic Russian minority, and economic ties to Russia, would make it a Russian problem and thus put Moscow in the role of finding a solution.

Since 1994, Ukraine has taken a number of steps aimed at getting its economic house in order, as a component of external security. Under former President Kravchuk there had been a strong anti-Russia component in Ukraine's foreign policy aimed primarily at establishing a Ukrainian identity separate from Russia. His administration had viewed the potential Russian threat as a unifying element for the nascent state and as an excuse for bypassing economic reforms which, it believed, could ignite social and political dislocations that Moscow could exploit.

The current administration of Leonid Kuchma is more realistic. It views Russia as a strategic partner and has made maintaining good relations with Moscow a priority. Kuchma has also instituted an economic reform program, including freeing of prices, large and small scale privatization, and a reduction of subsidies. These measures have run into political problems in the parliament and among bureaucrats and others who regard them as a threat to their political and economic interests. Thus, Ukraine's reform efforts have been less than successful. Kiev needs to further separate its economic relationship with Russia from its political. Rational and beneficial reasons for Ukrainian-Russian economic relations too often degenerate into a debilitating political debate regarding Ukraine's sovereignty.

Recommendations

Western policymakers need to focus on Ukraine as a potential solution to a security dilemma. Unfortunately, Ukraine has too often been viewed as a fragile state, subject to internal collapse, Russian control, and ill-fitted, due to history and geography, to be a true European partner. Such thinking leaves Ukraine to an Eastern bloc orientation and the question then becomes to what degree and in what timeframe. This would not serve the West's, nor Russia's, and definitely not Ukraine's interests. The challenge for the West is to help Ukraine become a viable and stable regional state, which includes economic and political support and rapid extension of links with the West. It entails helping Ukraine get its bearings and strength for the eventual role that Kiev, irrespective of its desires, seems predestined to carry out.

- As the process of NATO enlargement proceeds, NATO needs to be aware of the impact this will have on Ukraine's security as well as Europe's overall stability. The West should undertake a concerted effort to support and strengthen Ukraine and gear NATO enlargement to Ukraine's own domestic and external abilities to maintain its security.
- Ukraine has the ability to play a bridging role between NATO and Russia and more effort should be put into developing this aspect, including possibly formalizing Ukraine's stated non-bloc status in order to heighten its credibility as a bridge and as a regional stabilizing force.
- None of these efforts should be regarded as ends in themselves, but rather as building blocks to pan-European cooperation and integration.

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